

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 18
Abd al-Rahman III

Hello again. Last time we examined the disastrous rule of the Emir Abd-Allah, who managed to cling tightly to power in Al-Andalus for twenty-four years, despite being seemingly uninterested in actually governing. By the end of his reign, just about everything inside the Iberian peninsula was flourishing except Al-Andalus. King Alfonso III had expanded the Kingdom of Asturias to impressive levels, and the seeds of what would one day become the Christian entities of Catalonia and the Kingdom of Navarre had been sown. Al-Andalus itself though seemed to be on the verge of disintegration. Outside the seat of power in Cordoba, taxes were no longer being collected, Umayyad rule was breaking down, and rebel forces were in the ascendancy. Abd-Allah's disastrous period of rule ended when he died in the year 912, but before we move to welcoming a new Emir to the throne, we are going to head to the northern portion of the peninsula to observe the downfall of King Alfonso III.

Now, as we've seen in previous episodes, King Alfonso was a highly effective and successful monarch who had taken the tiny Kingdom of Asturias and expanded it out across a goodly portion of the top quarter of the Iberian peninsula. However, despite being one of the most celebrated kings in the history of Asturias, his reign ended with a splutter and a whimper. Now historians dispute exactly what happened, but it looks like this was predominantly the fault of King Alfonso's three sons, Garcia, Ordono, and Fruela. All three sons appear to have inherited their father's ambition and drive, but unlike their father the three sons had no outlet through which to direct their energies, so they mostly spent their time dreaming of big futures for themselves and working out various strategies for booting their father off his throne. In the year 909 or 910 they succeeded, and King Alfonso III was forced to abdicate. After handing the kingdom he had worked so hard to expand to his three sons, King Alfonso made a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, before dying in December of the year 910.

So how did King Alfonso's sons deal with their rise to power? You would expect the eldest son, Garcia, to inherit his father's kingdom, then possibly place his younger brothers in positions of power, but the two younger brothers, Ordono and Fruela, were having none of that. All three men were ambitious and were not only prepared to stab their father in the back in order to advance themselves, they were fully prepared to attack each other as well. So there was only really one way forward. The newly expanded Kingdom of Asturias was split into three separate kingdoms, so that each son could inherit a section and become a king. The new kingdoms were the Kingdom of Asturias, which was inherited by Fruela; the Kingdom of Galicia which went to Ordono; and the Kingdom of Leon, which was claimed by the eldest son Garcia.

This dinky little plan, where every child wins a prize after having booted their father off the throne, didn't work out in the long run though. In fact, by the year 925, only fifteen years after the forced abdication of King Alfonso, all three kings, Garcia, Ordono, and Fruela, had died. The good news was that this meant that the three kingdoms pretty much merged back into one. Garcia died first, leaving no heir, so the Kingdom of Leon was inherited by the next eldest son, Ordono, who merged it into his kingdom, Galicia. However, Ordono also died, leaving no heirs, meaning that the combined kingdoms of Leon and Galicia were inherited by the only son left standing, King Fruela of Asturias. But then Fruela also died, plunging Asturias into a prolonged succession crisis.

The upshot of all of this is that, unlike his predecessors, the next Emir of Al-Andalus won't have to worry too much about Asturian expansion or aggression for the next little while.

So, who is this next Emir of Al-Andalus? Well, he's a young man with a familiar name: Abd al-Rahman. Twenty year old Abd al-Rahman was Abd-Allah's grandson, the son in fact of one of Abd-Allah's murder victims. Abd al-Rahman himself was blond with blue eyes, by virtue of the fact that his grandmother had been Abd al-Rahman's Basque wife, and his mother was a Frankish woman. In addition to being fair-haired, Abd al-Rahman was also seriously short. In fact, his legs were so much shorter than average that when he rode his horse, his stirrups had to be raised to almost comical levels, so that they were just below the saddle. There is no indication that Abd al-Rahman was sensitive about his stature, but it does seem that he disliked his blond hair, with Brian Catlos noting in his book "Kingdoms of Faith" that Abd al-Rahman occasionally dyed his beard in an attempt to emphasise his Arab heritage.

Despite being only relatively young, short, and blonde, and despite being the Emir's grandson and not his son, Abd-Allah had singled out Abd al-Rahman to be his chosen successor, which turned out to be a very savvy move. In fact, in his book "Muslim Spain and Portugal, A Political History of Al-Andalus", Hugh Kennedy describes the decision by Abd-Allah to declare his grandson Abd al-Rahman to be his successor as one of the few moves made by Abd-Allah during his reign which couldn't be faulted.

Young Abd al-Rahman wasn't an obvious choice for Emir. Abd-Allah had ordered the execution of Abd al-Rahman's father, who was Abd-Allah's son Mohammed, when Abd al-Rahman was only a baby. In addition to being blond-haired and blue-eyed, so perhaps not looking like a classic Umayyad Arab, Abd al-Rahman had little military experience, and was not considered to be a religious leader. He had a number of uncles who possessed better military skills and more experience in administration than he did. But despite these apparent shortcomings, Abd al-Rahman was Abd-Allah's chosen successor, and he became the new Emir, Abd al-Rahman III on the 16th of October in the year 912.

Now, despite the fact that he was only twenty years old when he became the ruler of Al-Andalus, it seems that Abd al-Rahman had spent a considerable amount of time planning for his rise to power, because as soon as he became the Emir he seemed to know exactly what to do, and he hit the ground running, so to speak.

As we've already mentioned, the situation in Al-Andalus at the end of Abd-Allah's reign was pretty dire, with central administrative control having effectively broken down. As soon as Abd al-Rahman III settled into his new position in Cordoba, he arranged for the areas adjacent to the city to fall under his control. This was easier said than done, as few local leaders outside the capital city now accepted the authority of Cordoba, and the army, which had been the tool traditionally used by Emirs to subdue their subjects, had pretty much disintegrated. Still, Abd al-Rahman was persistent, dogged, and methodical in reasserting the Emir's power. His policy appears to have been one of slowly, but carefully and methodically, spreading his power out from Cordoba and putting in place measures to ensure the permanent reestablishment of central rule.

This process included destroying the power-base and authority of rebel leaders who had risen to prominence during the past couple of decades which, astonishingly, Abd al-Rahman III was able to do. How did he do this? Well, by a combination of the popular carrot and stick method. The stick part pretty much exclusively involved sieges. Abd

al-Rahman III seemed to have a knack for sieges, and in some places sporting particularly stubborn rebel leaders, such as Bobastro and Toledo, his sieges developed an air of a permanent arrangement, sporting extensive infrastructure to support the Emir's forces, including marketplaces. While he didn't remain at every siege personally, Abd al-Rahman III installed a trusted military commander at each siege, and the siege itself appeared to be an arrangement which the Emir could quite happily carry on indefinitely.

The prospect of having your rebel enclave subject to a siege which could go on forever if need be was certainly a stick which prompted many rebel leaders to surrender, but another important factor involved Abd al-Rahman's carrot. The carrot which was offered by the Emir to the rebels was in the form of leniency. Should the besieged rebel leader surrender to the Emir's forces, well he wouldn't be executed or subjected to harsh punishment. Instead, most rebel leaders were offered positions inside the Emir's administration, either in the army or within government. This offered the rebel a way forward which involved the rebel not only staying alive but also holding on to a degree of power, although in the future that power would be exercised in support of Umayyad inside Al-Andalus and not against it. To ensure that rebel leaders who had surrendered wouldn't be tempted back to their old strongholds Abd al-Rahman III made sure that every rebel stronghold was demolished, stone by stone, after surrendering, and that when a new structure was built it would be garrisoned by men loyal to Cordoba.

Now, the dismantling of rebel strongholds, the removal of rebel leaders from power, and the reassertion of control by Cordoba across Al-Andalus didn't happen overnight, but it did happen. Actually, the entire process took around twenty-five years in total, but gradually, methodically, Abd al-Rahman III brought every single rebel leader to heel.

The King of Seville surrendered to the Emir relatively early on and was rewarded by being granted a temporary position inside the administration at Cordoba. The rebel strongholds to hold out the longest were at Bobastro, Badajoz, Toledo and Zaragosa.

Ibn Hafsun, the rebel of Bobastro, who we discussed back in Episode 16, died in the year 917, only five years after Abd al-Rahman's rise to power. However, Ibn Hafsun had four sons, who were all determined to continue their father's rebel stance, and maintain the family's hold over the southern portion of the peninsula, as their father had managed to do for the past thirty or so years. They buried their father's body at Bobastro, then prepared the hilltop fortress to continue its stand against Cordoba. By the year 927, Abd al-Rahman III decided that enough was enough. He established a permanent siege around the hilltop fortress, and early the following year Bobastro finally capitulated. Abd al-Rahman ordered the body of the old rebel leader, Ibn Hafsun, to be exhumed from its grave. Then he ordered it to be transported to Cordoba, where he had it crucified on the gate of the city, as a warning to other rebel holdouts. He was more merciful, however, to the old rebel's sons. One son, who had negotiated the surrender of Bobastro, was singled out for particular honour's by being accepted into the Emir's army.

Badajoz, the seat of power of the rebel al-Jilliqi, was to prove a little trickier to subdue, as while Bobastro was a single fortress, Badajoz had developed into a large town. Al-Jilliqi himself had died prior to Abd al-Rahman's rise to power, but his extended family members, known as the Banu Marwan, maintained a rebel stance over the fortified city. Abd al-Rahman ordered a blockade of the city, and also used a type of economic warfare, ordering the productive fruit trees in farms outside the city walls to be destroyed. The city held out for a lengthy period of time, but the last of the Banu Marwan finally surrendered in

the year 930. The defeated rebels were relocated to Cordoba and were given senior positions inside the military.

The city of Toledo, which had been rebelling on and off since the establishment of Al-Andalus, finally capitulated in the year 932, after a lengthy siege and after also having its fruit trees destroyed. Following the surrender of the city, Abd al-Rahman garrisoned the town with his own hand-picked men, then appointed a loyal governor to enforce Cordoba's rule inside Toledo.

The final major holdout was the border city of Zaragoza to the east, a place which, like Toledo, seemed to have been in a near constant cycle of rebellion. Zaragoza submitted to the Emir's rule in the year 932,

So, by the year 932, Al-Andalus was, perhaps for the first time, truly subject to central rule, which was, considering the condition it had been in when Abd al-Rahman rose to power, pretty impressive.

So, was subduing rebels and reasserting control by Cordoba the only abilities in Abd al-Rahman's skill set? No. You might be interested to know that he also successfully overhauled and reformed the military forces inside Al-Andalus. In order to dilute the power which had been amassed by local military commanders, Abd al-Rahman imported large quantities of slaves to serve in the military. In addition, he recruited a bunch of Berber mercenary forces from northern Africa. This move effectively de-Arabised the military forces, so to speak, and ensured that the armies across Al-Andalus reported to Cordoba and not to local governors. Abd al-Rahman III used his newly refurbished forces to successfully defend his northern borders against aggression from the Christian north, and to also keep the notoriously fickle frontier region near the Pyrenees mountains under the thumb of Cordoba. He also expanded his navy. He established naval bases along the Mediterranean coastline and used them to fend off raids by hostile forces, while also turning a blind eye when his ships engaged in the occasional spot of piracy on the side.

Now, you might be asking ourselves: Well, now that Abd al-Rahman III has everything pretty much under control, does he have a plan in mind? Well, yes, he absolutely does. Only seventeen years into his rule, Abd al-Rahman III made a bold move that would have been absolutely unthinkable until that point in time, and which propelled Al-Andalus up the leader-board of countries until it became, in the words of Brian Catlos and I quote "the greatest and most prosperous kingdom in contemporary Europe" end quote. Ever since the establishment of Muslim rule in the Iberian peninsula, the name of the Caliph had been mentioned in mosques across Al-Andalus after the conclusion of the Call to Prayer, with the Abbasid ruler in Baghdad being the focus during recent times. Well, not any more. At noon on the 17th of January in the year 929, as Muslims gathered inside the Great Mosque at Cordoba for Friday Prayers, the Abbasid ruler in Baghdad was not mentioned. Instead, the Imam hailed Abd al-Rahman III as the Prince of the Faithful. Abd al-Rahman III was announcing to the world that he was no longer just the Emir of Al-Andalus; he was now a Caliph of Islam.

Join me next time as Abd al-Rahman III launches the Caliphate of Al-Andalus into a new golden age. Until next time, bye for now.

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